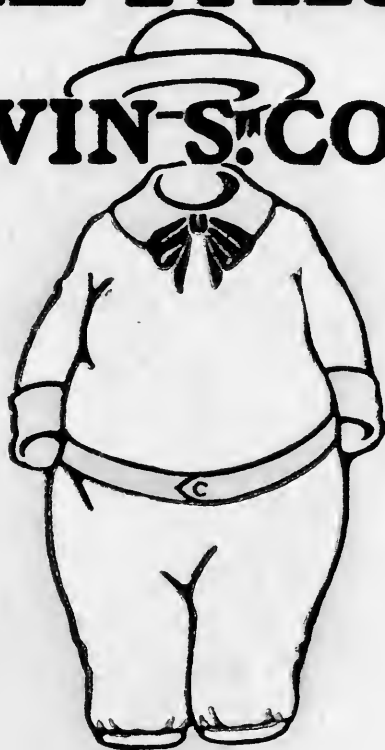


THE LIFE OF THE PARTY

IRVIN-S. COBB



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by

Mrs. Triffing Bancroft



The Life of the Party

Happy Easter
To Bury
from
Mother.



"ARE YOU PAYIN' AN ELECTION BET THREE WEEKS
AFTER THE ELECTION'S OVER? OR IS IT THAT
YOU'RE JEST A PLAIN HEDADDLED IDIOT?"

The Life of the Party

By

Irvin S. Cobb

*Author of "Back Home," "Old Judge
Priest," etc., etc.*

Illustrated By James M. Preston



New York

George H. Doran Company

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The Life of the Party

To
MISTRESS MAY WILSON PRESTON
A LADY OF GREAT DRAWING QUALITIES

ILLUSTRATIONS

“Are you payin’ an election bet three weeks after the election’s over? Or is it that you’re jest a plain bedaddled ijiet?”	<i>Frontispiece</i>
	PAGE
“That’s nice,” spake the fearsome stranger. “Now stay jest the way you are and don’t make no peep or I’ll have to plug you wit’ this here gat”	24
Mr. Leary’s gait became a desperate gallop, and as he galloped he shouted: “Wait, please, here I am.—Here’s your passenger”	32

The Life of the Party

I

It had been a successful party, most successful. Mrs. Carroway's parties always were successes, but this one nearing its conclusion stood out notably from a long and unbroken Carrowayian record. It had been a children's party; that is to say, everybody came in costume with intent to represent children of any age between one year and a dozen years. But twelve years was the limit; positively nobody, either in dress or deportment, could be more than twelve years old. Mrs. Carroway had made this point explicit in sending out the invitations, and so it had been, down to the last hair ribbon and the last shoe buckle. And between dances they had played at the games of childhood, such as drop the handkerchief, and King William was King James' son and prisoner's base and the rest of them.

The novelty of the notion had been a main contributory factor to its success; that, plus the fact that nine healthy adults out of ten dearly love to put on freakish garbings and go somewhere. To be exactly truthful, the basic idea itself could hardly be called new, since long before some gifted mind thought out the scheme of giving children's parties for grown-ups, but with her customary brilliancy Mrs. Carroway had seized upon the issues of the day to serve her social

purposes, weaving timeliness and patriotism into the fabric of her plan by making it a war party as well. Each individual attending was under pledge to keep a full and accurate tally of the moneys expended upon his or her costume and upon arrival at the place of festivities to deposit a like amount in a repository put in a conspicuous spot to receive these contributions, the entire sum to be handed over later to the guardians of a military charity in which Mrs. Carroway was active.

It was somehow felt that this fostered a worthy spirit of wartime economy, since the donation of a person who wore an expensive costume would be relatively so much larger than the donation of one who went in for the simpler things. Moreover, books of thrift stamps were attached to the favours, the same being children's toys of guaranteed American manufacture.

In the matter of refreshments Mrs. Carroway had been at pains to comply most scrupulously with the existing rationing regulations. As the hostess herself said more than once as she moved to and fro in a flounced white frock having the exaggeratedly low waistline of the sort of frock which frequently is worn by a tot of tender age, with a wide blue sash draped about her almost down at her knees, and with fluffy skirts quite up to her knees, with her hair caught up in a coquettish blue bow on the side of her head and a diminutive fan tied fast to one of her wrists with a blue ribbon—so many of the ladies who had attained to Mrs. Carroway's fairly well-ripened years did go in for these extremely girlishly little-girly effects—as the hostess thus attired and moving hither

and yon remark, "If Mr. Herbert Hoover himself were here as one of my guests to-night I am just too perfectly sure he could find absolutely nothing whatsoever to object to!"

It would have required much stretching of that elastic property, the human imagination, to conceive of Mr. Herbert Hoover being there, whether in costume or otherwise, but that was what Mrs. Carroway said and repeated. Always those to whom she spoke came right out and agreed with her.

Now it was getting along toward three-thirty o'clock of the morning after, and the party was breaking up. Indeed for half an hour past, this person or that had been saying it was time, really, to be thinking about going—thus voicing a conviction that had formed at a much earlier hour in the minds of the tenants of the floor below Mrs. Carroway's studio apartment, which like all properly devised studio apartments was at the top of the building.

It was all very well to be a true Bohemian, ready to give and take, and if one lived down round Washington Square one naturally made allowances for one's neighbours and all that, but half past three o'clock in the morning was half past three o'clock in the morning, and there was no getting round that, say what you would. And besides there were some people who needed a little sleep once in a while even if there were some other people who seemed to be able to go without any sleep; and finally, though patience was a virtue, enough of a good thing was enough and too much was surplusage. Such was the opinion of the tenants one flight down.

So the party was practically over. Mr. Algernon

Leary, of the firm of Leary & Slack, counsellors and attorneys at law, with offices at Number Thirty-two Broad Street, was among the very last to depart. Never had Mr. Leary spent a more pleasant evening. He had been in rare form, a variety of causes contributing to this happy state. To begin with, he had danced nearly every dance with the lovely Miss Milly Hollister, for whom he entertained the feelings which a gentleman of ripened judgment, and one who was rising rapidly in his profession, might properly entertain for an entirely charming young woman of reputed means and undoubted social position.

A preposterous ass named Perkins—at least, Mr. Leary mentally indexed Perkins as a preposterous ass—had brought Miss Hollister to the party, but thereafter in the scheme of things Perkins did not count. He was a cipher. You could back him up against a wall and take a rubber-tipped pencil and rub him right out, as it were; and with regards to Miss Hollister that, figuratively, was what Mr. Leary had done to Mr. Perkins. Now on the other hand Voris might have amounted to something as a potential rival, but Voris being newly appointed as a police magistrate was prevented by press of official duties from coming to the party; so Mr. Leary had had a clear field, as the saying goes, and had made the most of it, as the other saying goes.

Moreover, Mr. Leary had been the recipient of unlimited praise upon the ingenuity and the uniqueness expressed in his costume. He had not represented a Little Lord Fauntleroy or a Buster Brown or a Boy Scout or a Juvenile Cadet or a Midshipmite or an Oliver Twist. There had been three Boy Scouts

present and four Buster Browns and of sailor-suited persons there had been no end, really. But Mr. Leary had chosen to appear as Himself at the Age of Three; and, as the complimentary comment proved, his get-up had reflected credit not alone upon its wearer but upon its designer, Miss Rowena Skiff, who drew fashion pictures for one of the women's magazines. Out of the goodness of her heart and the depths of her professional knowledge Miss Skiff had gone to Mr. Leary's aid, supervising the preparation of his wardrobe at a theatrical costumer's shop uptown and, on the evening before, coming to his bachelor apartments, accompanied by her mother, personally to add those small special refinements which meant so much, as he now realised, in attaining the desired result.

"Oh, Mr. Leary, I must tell you again how very fetching you do look! Your costume is adorable, really it is; so—so cute and everything. And I don't know what I should have done without you to help in the games and everything. There's no use denying it, Mr. Leary—you were the life of the party, absolutely!"

At least twice during the night Mrs. Carroway had told Mr. Leary this, and now as he bade her farewell she was saying it once more in practically the same words, when Mrs. Carroway's coloured maid, Blanche, touched him on the arm.

"'Scuse me, suh," apologised Blanche, "but the hall man downstairs he send up word jes' now by the elevator man 'at you'd best be comin' right on down now, suh, effen you expects to git a taxicab. He say to tell you they ain't but one taxicab left an' the driver of

'at one's been waitin' fur hours an' he act like he might go way any minute now. 'At's whut the hall man send word, suh."

Blanche had brought his overcoat along and held it up for him, imparting to the service that small suggestion of a ceremonial rite which the members of her race invariably do display when handling a garment of richness of texture and indubitable cost. Mr. Leary let her help him into the coat and slipped largess into her hand, and as he stepped aboard the waiting elevator for the downward flight Mrs. Carroway's voice came fluting to him, once again repeating the flattering phrase: "You surely were the life of the party!"

II

It was fine to have been the life of the party. It was not quite so fine to discover that the taxicab to which he must entrust himself for the long ride up to West Eighty-fifth Street was a most shabby-appearing vehicle, the driver of which, moreover, as Mr. Leary could divine even as he crossed the sidewalk, had wiled away the tedium of waiting by indulgence in draughts of something more potent than the chill air of latish November. Mr. Leary peered doubtfully into the illuminated countenance but dulled eyes of the driver and caught a whiff of a breath alcoholically fragrant, and he understood that the warning relayed to him by Blanche had carried a subtle double meaning. Still, there was no other taxicab to be had. The street might have been a byway in old Pompeii for all the life that moved within it. Washington Square, facing him, was as empty as a graveyard generally is at

this hour, and the semblance of a conventional graveyard in wintertime was helped out by a light snow—the first of the season—sifting down in large damp flakes.

Twice and thrice he repeated the address, speaking each time sharply and distinctly, before the meaning seemed to filter into the befogged intellect of the inebriate. On the third rendition the latter roused from where he was slumped down.

"I garcia, Steve," he said thickly. "I garcia firs' time only y' hollowed s'loud I couldn' und'stancher."

So saying he lurched into a semiupright posture and fumbled for the wheel. Silently condemning the curse of intemperance among the working classes of a great city Mr. Leary boarded the cab and drew the skirts of his overcoat down in an effort to cover his knees. With a harsh grating of clutches and an abrupt jerk the taxi started north.

Wobbling though he was upon his perch the driver mechanically steered a reasonably straight course. The passenger leaning back in the depths of the cab confessed to himself he was a trifle weary and more than a trifle sleepy. At thirty-seven one does not dance and play children's games alternately for six hours on a stretch without paying for the exertion in a sensation of let-downness. His head slipped forward on his chest.

III

WITH a drowsy uncertainty as to whether he had been dozing for hours or only for a very few minutes Mr. Leary opened his eyes and sat up. The car was halted slantwise against a curbing; the chauffeur was

jammed down again into a heap. Mr. Leary stepped nimbly forth upon the pavement, feeling in his overcoat pocket for the fare; and then he realised he was not in West Eighty-fifth Street at all; he was not in any street that he remembered ever having seen before in the course of his life. Offhand, though, he guessed he was somewhere in that mystic maze of brick and mortar known as Old Greenwich Village; and, for a further guess, in that particular part of it where business during these last few years had been steadily encroaching upon the ancient residences of long departed Knickerbocker families.

The street in which he stood, for a wonder in this part of town, ran a fairly straight course. At its western foot he could make out through the drifting flakes where a squat structure suggestive of a North River freight dock interrupted the sky line. In his immediate vicinity the street was lined with tall bleak fronts of jobbing houses, all dark and all shuttered. Looking the other way, which would be eastward, he could make out where these wholesale establishments tailed off, to be succeeded by the lower shapes of venerable dwellings adorned with the dormered windows and the hip roofs which distinguished a bygone architectural period. Some distance off in this latter direction the vista between the buildings was cut across by the straddle-bug structure of one of the Elevated roads. All this Mr. Leary comprehended in a quick glance about him, and then he turned on the culprit cabman with rage in his heart.

"See here, you!" he snapped crossly, jerking the other by the shoulder. "What do you mean by bring-

ing me away off here! This isn't where I wanted to go. Oh, wake up, you!"

Under his vigorous shaking the driver slid over sideways until he threatened to decant himself out upon Mr. Leary. His cap falling off exposed the blank face of one who for the time being has gone dead to the world and to all its carking cares, and the only response he offered for his mishandling was a deep and sincere snore. The man was hopelessly intoxicated; there was no question about it. More to relieve his own deep chagrin than for any logical reason Mr. Leary shook him again; the net results were a protesting semiconscious gargle and a further careening slant of the sleeper's form.

Well, there was nothing else to do but walk. He must make his way afoot until he came to Sixth Avenue or on to Fifth, upon the chance of finding in one of these two thoroughfares a ranging night-hawk cab. As a last resort he could take the Subway or the L north. This contingency, though, Mr. Leary considered with feelings akin to actual repugnance. He dreaded the prospect of ribald and derisive comments from chance fellow travellers upon a public transportation line. For you should know that though Mr. Leary's outer garbing was in the main conventional there were strikingly incongruous features of it too.

From his neck to his knees he correctly presented the aspect of a gentleman returning late from social diversions, caparisoned in a handsome fur-faced, fur-lined top coat. But his knees were entirely bare; so, too, were his legs down to about midway of the calves, where there ensued, as it were, a pair of white

silk socks, encircled by pink garters with large and ornate pink ribbon bows upon them. His feet were bestowed in low slippers with narrow buttoned straps crossing the insteps. It was Miss Skiff, with her instinct for the verities, who had insisted upon bows for the garters and straps for the slippers, these being what she had called finishing touches. Likewise it was due to that young lady's painstaking desire for appropriateness and completeness of detail that Mr. Leary at this moment wore upon his head a very wide-brimmed, very floppy straw hat with two quaint pink-ribbon streamers floating jauntily down between his shoulders at the back.

For reasons which in view of this sartorial description should be obvious, Mr. Leary hugged closely up to the abutting house fronts when he left behind him the marooned taxi with its comatose driver asleep upon it, like one lone castaway upon a small island in a sea of emptiness, and set his face eastward. Such was the warmth of his annoyance he barely felt the chill striking upon his exposed nether limbs or took note of the big snowflakes melting damply upon his thinly protected ankles. Then, too, almost immediately something befell which upset him still more.

He came to where a wooden marquee, projecting over the entrance to a shipping room, made a black strip along the feebly lighted pavement. As he entered the patch of darkness the shape of a man materialised out of the void and barred his way, and in that same fraction of a second something shiny and hard was thrust against Mr. Leary's daunted bosom, and in a low forceful rumble a voice commanded him as follows: "Put up yore mitts—and keep 'em up!"

Matching the action of his hands everything in Mr. Leary seemed to start skyward simultaneously. His hair on his scalp straightened, his breath came up from his lungs in a gasp, his heart lodged in his throat, and his blood quit his feet, leaving them practically devoid of circulation and ascended and drummed in his temples. He had a horrid, emptied feeling in his diaphragm, too, as though the organs customarily resident there had caught the contagion of the example and gone north.

"That's nice," spake the fearsome stranger. "Now stay jest the way you are and don't make no peep or I'll have to plug you wit' this here gat."

His right hand maintained the sinister pressure of the weapon against the victim's deflated chest, while his left dexterously explored the side pockets of Mr. Leary's overcoat. Then the same left hand jerked the frogged fastenings of the garment asunder and went pawing swiftly over Mr. Leary's quivering person, seeking the pockets which would have been there had Mr. Leary been wearing garments bearing the regulation and ordained number of pockets. But the exploring fingers merely slid along a smooth and unbroken frontal surface.

"Wot t'ell? Wot t'ell?" muttered the footpad in bewilderment. "Say, where're you got yore leather and yore kittle hid? Speak up quick!"

"I'm—I'm—not carrying a watch or a purse tonight," quavered Mr. Leary. "These—these clothes I happen to be wearing are not made with places in them for a watch or anything. And you've already taken what money I had—it was all in my overcoat pocket."

"Yep; a pinch of chicken feed and wot felt like about four one-bone bills." The highwayman's accent was both ominous and contemptuous. "Say, wotcher mean drillin' round dis town in some kinder funny riggin' wit'out no plunder on you? I gotta right to belt you one acrost the bean."

"I'd rather you didn't do that," protested Mr. Leary in all seriousness. "If—if you'd only give me your address I could send you some money in the morning to pay you for your trouble——"

"Cut out de kiddin'," broke in the disgusted marauder. His tone changed slightly for the better. "Say, near as I kin tell by feelin' it, dat ain't such a bum benny you're sportin'. I'll jest take dat along wit' me. Letcher arms down easy and hold 'em straight out from yore sides while I gits it offen you. And no funny business!"

"Oh, please, please, don't take my overcoat," implored Mr. Leary, plunged by these words into a deeper panic. "Anything but that! I—you—you really mustn't leave me without my overcoat."

"Wot else is dere to take?"

Even as he uttered the scornful question the thief had wrested the garment from Mr. Leary's helpless form and was backing away into the darkness.

Out of impenetrable gloom came his farewell warning: "Stay right where you are for fi' minutes wit'out movin' or makin' a yelp. If you wiggle before de time is up I gotta pal right yere watchin' you, and he'll sure plug you. He ain't no easy-goin' guy like wot I am. You're gittin' off lucky it's me stuck you up, stidder him."

With these words he was gone—gone with Mr. Leary's overcoat, with Mr. Leary's last cent, with his latchkey, with his cardcase, with all by which Mr. Leary might hope to identify himself before a wary and incredulous world for what he was. He was gone, leaving there in the protecting ledge of shadow the straw-hatted, socked-and-slippered, leg-gartered figure of a plump being, clad otherwise in a single vestment which began at the line of a becomingly low neckband and terminated in blousy outbulging bifurcations just above the naked knees. Light stealing into this obscured and sheltered spot would have revealed that this garment was, as to texture, a heavy, silklike, sheeny, material; and as to colour a vivid and compelling pink—the exact colour of a slice of well-ripened watermelon; also that its sleeves ended elbow-high in an effect of broad turned-back cuffs; finally, that adown its owner's back it was snugly and adequately secured by means of a close-set succession of very large, very shiny white pearl buttons; the whole constituting an enlarged but exceedingly accurate copy of what, descriptively, is known to the manufactured-garment trade as a one-piece suit of child's rompers, self-trimmed, fastening behind; suitable for nursery, playground and seashore, especially recommended as summer wear for the little ones; to be had in all sizes; prices such-and-such.

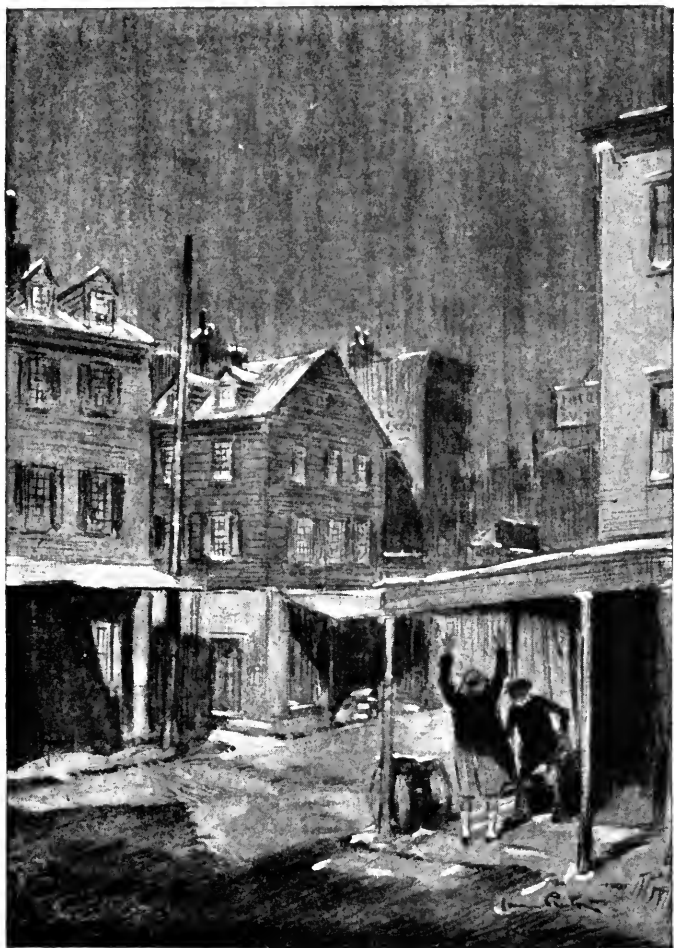
Within a space of some six or seven minutes this precisely was what the nearest street lamp did reveal unto itself as its downward-slanting beams fell upon a furtive, fugitive shape, suggestive in that deficient subradiance of a vastly overgrown forked parsnip, miraculously endowed with powers of locomotion and

bound for somewhere in a hurry; excepting of course no forked parsnip, however remarkable in other respects, would be wearing a floppy straw hat in a snowstorm; nor is it likely it would be adorned lengthwise in its rear with a highly decorative design of broad, smooth, polished disks which, even in that poor illumination, gleamed and twinkled and wiggled snakily in and out of alignment, in accord with the movements of their wearer's spinal column.

But the reader and I, better informed than any lamp post could be as to the prior sequence of events, would know at a glance it was no parsnip we beheld, but Mr. Algernon Leary, now suddenly enveloped, through no fault of his own, in one of the most overpowering predicaments conceivable to involve a rising lawyer and a member of at least two good clubs; and had we but been there to watch him, knowing, as we would know, the developments leading up to this present situation, we might have guessed what was the truth: That Mr. Leary was hot bent upon retreating to the only imaginable refuge left to him at this juncture—to wit, the interior of the stranded taxicab which he had abandoned but a short time previously.

IV

NEARLY all of us at some time or other in our lives have dreamed awful dreams of being discovered in a public place with nothing at all upon our bodies, and have awakened, burning hot with the shame of an enormous and terrific embarrassment. Being no student of the psychic phenomena of human slumber I do not know whether this is a subconscious harking-



"THAT'S NICE," SPAKE THE FEARSOME STRANGER. "NOW STAY JEST
THE WAY YOU' ARE AND DON'T MAKE NO PEEP
OR I'LL HAVE TO PLUG YOU WIT' THIS HERE GAT"

back to the days of our infancy or whether it is merely a manifestation to prove the inadvisability of partaking of Welsh rabbits and lobster salads immediately before retiring. More than once Mr. Leary had dreamed thus, but at this moment he realised how much more dread and distressing may be a dire actuality than a vision conjured up out of the mysteries of sleep.

One surprised by strangers in a nude or partially nude state may have any one of a dozen acceptable excuses for being so circumstanced. An earthquake may have caught one unawares, say; or inopportunately a bathroom door may have blown open. Once the first shock occasioned by the untoward appearance of the victim has passed away he is sure of sympathy. For him pity is promptly engendered and volunteer aid is enlisted.

But Mr. Leary had a profound conviction that, revealed in this ghastly plight before the eyes of his fellows, his case would be regarded differently; that instead of commiseration there would be for him only the derision which is so humiliating to a sensitive nature. He felt so undignified, so glaringly conspicuous, so—well, so scandalously immature. If only it had been an orthodox costume party which Mrs. Carroway had given, why, then he might have gone as a Roman senator or as a private chief or an Indian brave or a cavalier. In doublet or jack boots or war bonnet, in a toga, even, he might have mastered the dilemma and carried off a dubious situation. But to be adrift in an alien quarter of a great and heartless city round four o'clock in the morning, so picturesquely and so unseasonably garbed, and in im-

minent peril of detection, was a prospect calculated to fill one with the frenzied delirium of a nightmare made real. Put yourself in his place, I ask you.

His slippered feet spurned the thin snow as he moved rapidly back toward the west. Ahead of him he could detect the clumped outlines of the taxicab, and at the sight of it he quickened to a trot. Once safely within it he could take stock of things; could map out a campaign of future action; could think up ways and means of extricating himself from his present lamentable case with the least possible risk of undesirable publicity. At any rate he would be shielded for the moment from the life which might at any moment awaken in the still sleeping and apparently vacant neighbourhood. Finally, of course, there was the hope that the drunken cabman might be roused, and once roused might be capable, under promise of rich financial reward, of conveying Mr. Leary to his bachelor apartments in West Eighty-fifth Street before dawn came, with its early-bird milkmen and its before-day newspaper distributors and its others too numerous to mention.

Without warning of any sort the cab started off, seemingly of its own volition. Mr. Leary's gait became a desperate gallop, and as he galloped he gave voice in entreaty.

"Hey there!" he shouted. "Wait, please. Here I am—here's your passenger!"

His straw hat blew off, but this was no time to stop for a straw hat. For a few rods he gained upon the vehicle, then as its motion increased he lost ground and ran a losing race. Its actions disclosed that a conscious if an uncertain hand guided its destinies.

Wabbling this way and that it wheeled skiddingly round a corner. When Mr. Leary, rowelled on to yet greater speed by the spurs of a mounting misery, likewise turned the corner it was irrevocably remote, beyond all prospect of being overtaken by anything human pursuing it afoot. The swaying black bulk of it diminished and was swallowed up in the snow shower and the darkness. The rattle of mishandled gears died to a thin metallic clanking, then to a purring whisper, and then the whisper expired, dead silence ensuing.

v

IN the void of this silence stood Mr. Leary, shivering now in the reaction that had succeeded the nerve jar of being robbed at a pistol's point, and lacking the fervour of the chase to sustain him. For him the inconceivable disaster was complete and utter; upon him despair descended as a patent swatter upon a lone housefly. Miles away from home, penniless and friendless—the two terms being practically synonymous in New York—what asylum was there for him now? Suppose daylight found him abroad thus? Suppose he succumbed to exposure and was discovered stiffly frozen in a doorway? Death by processes of congealment must carry an added sting if one had to die in a suit of pink rompers buttoning down the back. As though the thought of freezing had been a cue to Nature he noted a tickling in his nose and a chokiness in his throat, and somewhere in his system, a long way off, so to speak, he felt a sneeze forming and approaching the surface.

To add to his state of misery, if anything could add

to its distressing total, he was taking cold. When Mr. Leary took cold he took it thoroughly and throughout his system. Very soon, as he knew by past experience, his voice would be hoarse and wheezy and his nose and his eyes would run. But the sneeze was delayed in transit, and Mr. Leary took advantage of the respite to cast a glance about him. Perhaps—the expedient had surged suddenly into his brain—perhaps there might be a hotel or a lodging house of sorts hereabouts? If so, such an establishment would have a night clerk on duty, and despite the baggageless and cashless state of the suppliant it was possible the night clerk might be won, by compassion or by argument or by both, to furnish Mr. Leary shelter until after breakfast time, when over the telephone he could reach friends and from these friends procure an outfit of funds and suitable clothing.

In sight, though, there was no structure which by its outward appearance disclosed itself as a place of entertainment for the casual wayfarer. Howsomever, lights were shining through the frosted panes of a row of windows stretching across the top floor of a building immediately at hand, and even as he made this discovery Mr. Leary was aware of the dimmed sounds of revelry and of orchestral music up there, and also of an illuminated canvas triangle stuck above the hallway entrance of the particular building in question, this device bearing a lettered inscription upon it to advertise that here the members of the Lawrence P. McGillicuddy Literary Association and Pleasure Club were holding their Grand Annual Civic Ball; admission One Dollar, including Hat Check; Ladies Free when accompanied by Gents. Evidently the

Lawrence P. McGillicuddys kept even later hours at their roisterings than the Bohemian sets in Washington Square kept.

Observing these evidences of adjacent life and merry-makings Mr. Leary cogitated. Did he dare intrude upon the festivities aloft there? And if he did so dare should he enter cavortingly, trippingly, with intent to deceive the assembled company into the assumption that he had come to their gathering in costume; or should he throw himself upon their charity and making open confession of his predicament seek to enlist the friendly offices of some kindly soul in extricating him from it?

While he canvassed the two propositions tentatively he heard the thud of footsteps descending the stairs from the dance hall, and governed by an uncontrollable impulse he leaped for concealment behind a pile of building material that was stacked handily upon the sidewalk almost at his elbow. He might possibly have driven himself to face a multitude indoors, but somehow could not, just naturally could not, in his present apparel, face one stranger outdoors—or at least not until he had opportunity to appraise the stranger.

It was a man who emerged from the hallway entrance; a stockily built man wearing his hat well over one ear and with his ulster opened and flung back exposing a broad chest to the wintry air. He was whistling a sprightly air.

Just as this individual came opposite the lumber pile the first dedicatory sneeze of a whole subsequent series of sneezes which had been burgeoning somewhere in the top of Mr. Leary's head, and which that

unhappy gentleman had been mechanically endeavouring to suppress, burst from captivity with a vast moist report. At the explosion the passer-by spun about and his whistle expired in a snort of angered surprise as the bared head of Mr. Leary appeared above the topmost board of the pile, and Mr. Leary's abashed face looked into his.

"Say," he demanded, "wotcher meanin', hidin' there and snortin' in a guy's ear?"

His manner was truculent; indeed, verged almost upon the menacing. Evidently the shock had adversely affected his temper, to the point where he might make personal issues out of unavoidable trifles. Instinctively Mr. Leary felt that the situation which had arisen called for diplomacy of the very highest order. He cleared his throat before replying.

"Good evening," he began, in what he vainly undertook to make a casual tone of voice. "I beg your pardon—the sneeze—ahem—occurred when I wasn't expecting it. Ahem—I wonder if you would do me a favour?"

"I would not! Come snortin' in a guy's ear that-a-way and then askin' him would he do you a favour: You got a crust for fair!" Here, though, a natural curiosity triumphed over the rising tides of indignation. "Wot favour do you want, anyway?" he inquired shortly.

"Would you—would you—I wonder if you would be willing to sell me that overcoat you're wearing?"

"I would not!"

"You see, the fact of the matter is I happened to be needing an overcoat very badly at the moment,"

pressed Mr. Leary. "I was hoping that you might be induced to name a price for yours."

"I would not! M. J. Cassidy wears M. J. Cassidy's clothes, and nobody else wears 'em, believe me! Wot's happened to your own coat?"

"I lost it—I mean it was stolen."

"Stole?"

"Yes, a robber with a revolver held me up a few minutes ago just over here in the next cross street and he took my coat away."

"Huh! Well, did you lose your hat the same way?"

"Yes—that is to say, no. I lost my hat running."

"Oh, you run, hey? Well, you look to me like a guy wot would run. Well, did he take your clothes, too? Is that why you're squattin' behind them timbers?" The inquisitive one took a step nearer.

"No—oh, no! I'm still wearing my—my—the costume I was wearing," answered Mr. Leary, apprehensively wedging his way still farther back between the stack of boards and the wall behind. "But you see——"

"Well then, barrin' the fact that you ain't got no hat, ain't you jest as well off without no overcoat now as I'd be if I fell for any hard-luck spiel from you and let you have mine?"

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that exactly," tendered Mr. Leary ingratiatingly. "I'm afraid my clothing isn't as suitable for outdoor wear as yours is. You see, I'd been to a sort of social function and on my way home it—it happened."

"Oh, it did, did it? Well, anyway, I should worry about you and your clothes," stated the other. He took a step onward, then halted; and now the gleam

of speculative gain was in his eye. "Say, if I was willin' to sell—not sayin' I would be, but if I was—wot would you be willin' to give for an overcoat like this here one?"

"Any price within reason—any price you felt like asking," said Mr. Leary, his hopes of deliverance re-kindling.

"Well, maybe I'd take twenty-five dollars for it just as it stands and no questions ast. How'd that strike you?"

"I'll take it. That seems a most reasonable figure."

"Well, fork over the twenty-five then, and the deal's closed."

"I'd have to send you the money to-morrow—I mean to-day. You see, the thief took all my cash when he took my overcoat."

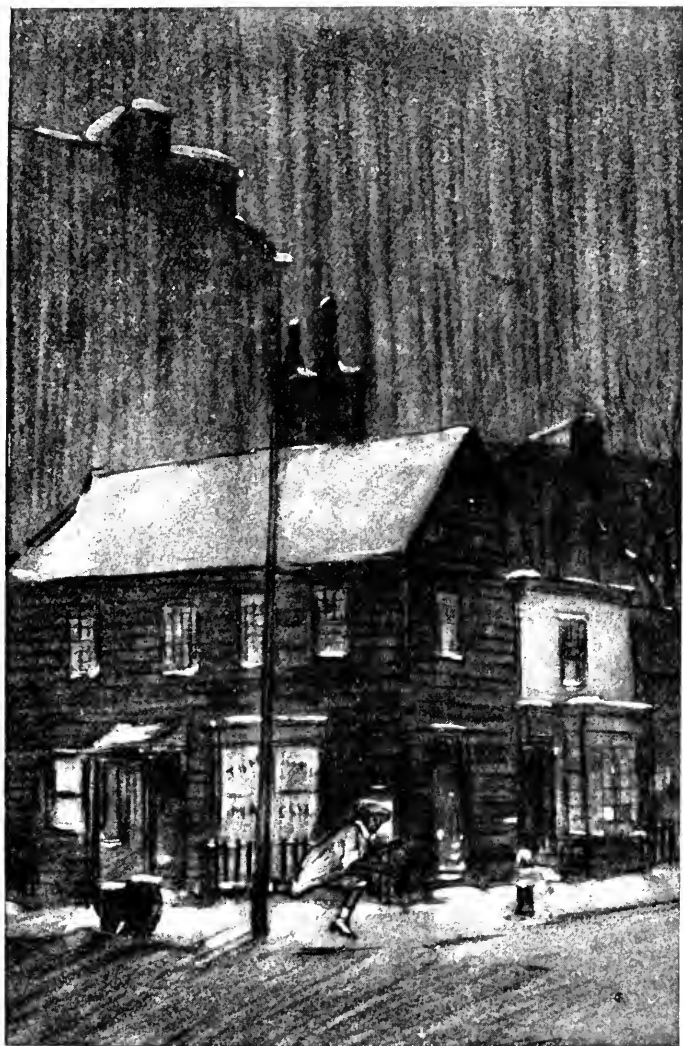
"Did, huh?"

"Yes, that's the present condition of things. Very annoying, isn't it? But I'll take your address. I'm a lawyer in business in Broad Street, and as soon as I reach my office I'll send the amount by messenger."

"Aw, to hell with you and your troubles! I might a-knowed you was some new kind of a panhandler when you come a-snortin' in my ear that-a-way. Better beat it while the goin's good. You're in the wrong neighbourhood to be springin' such a gag as this one you jest now sprang on me. Anyhow, I've wasted enough time on the likes of you."

He was ten feet away when Mr. Leary, his wits sharpened by his extremity, clutched at the last straw.

"One moment," he nervously begged. "Did I understand you to say your name was Cassidy?"



MR. LEARY'S GAIT BECAME A DESPERATE GALLOP, AND AS HE GALLOPED HE SHOUTED: "WAIT, PLEASE. HERE I AM—HERE'S YOIR PASSENGER!"

"You did. Wot of it?"

"Well, curious coincidence and all that—but my name happens to be Leary. And I thought that because of that you might——"

The stranger broke in on him. "Your name happens to be Leary, does it? Wot's your other name then?"

"Algernon."

Stepping lightly on the balls of his feet Mr. Cassidy turned back, and his mien for some reason was potentially that of a belligerent.

"Say," he declared threateningly, "you know wot I think about you? Well, I think you're a liar. No regular guy with the name of Leary would let a cheap stiff of a stick-up rob him out of the coat offen his back without puttin' up a battle. No regular guy named Leary would be named Algernon. Say, I think you're a Far Downer. I wouldn't be surprised but wot you was an A. P. A. on the top of that. And wot's all this here talk about goin' to a sociable func-ture and comin' away not suitably dressed? Come on out of that now and let's have a look at you."

"Really, I'd much rather not—if you don't mind," protested the miserable Mr. Leary. "I—I have reasons."

"The same here. Will you come out from behind there peaceable or will I fetch you out?"

So Mr. Leary came, endeavouring while coming to wear a manner combining an atmosphere of dignified aloofness and a sentiment of frank indifference to the opinion of this loutish busybody, with just a touch, a mere trace, as it were, of nonchalance thrown in. In short, coming out he sought to deport himself as

though it were the properest thing in the world for a man of years and discretion to be wearing a bright pink one-piece article of apparel on a public highway at four A. M. or thereabouts. Undoubtedly, considering everything, it was the hardest individual task essayed in New York during the first year of the war. Need I add that it was a failure—a total failure? As he stood forth fully and comprehensively revealed by the light of the adjacent transparency, Mr. Cassidy's squint of suspicion widened into a pop-eyed stare of temporary stupefaction.

"Well, for the love of—— In the name of—— Did anywan ever see the likes of——!"

He murmured the broken sentences as he circled about the form of the martyr. Completing the circuit, laughter of a particularly boisterous and concussive variety interrupted his fragmentary speech.

"Ha ha, ha ha," echoed Mr. Leary in a palpably forced and hollow effort, to show that he, too, could enter into the spirit of the occasion with heartiness. "Does strike one as rather unusual at first sight—doesn't it?"

"Why, you big hooman radish! Why, you strollin' sunset!" thus Mr. Cassidy responded. "Are you payin' an election bet three weeks after the election's over? Or is it that you're just a plain bedaddled ijiet? Or wot is it, I wonder?"

"I explained to you that I went to a party. It was a fancy-dress party," stated Mr. Leary.

Sharp on the words Mr. Cassidy's manner changed. Here plainly was a person of moods, changeable and temperseome.

"Ain't you ashamed of yourself, and you a large, grown man, to be skihootin' round with them kind of foolish duds on, and your own country at war this minute for decency and democracy?" From this it also was evident that Mr. Cassidy read the editorials in the papers. "You should take shame to yourself that you ain't in uniform instid of baby clothes."

It was the part of discretion, so Mr. Leary inwardly decided, to ignore the fact that the interrogator himself appeared to be well within the military age.

"I'm a bit old to enlist," he stated, "and I'm past the draft age."

"Then you're too old to be wearin' such a riggin'. But, by cripes, I'll say this for you—you make a picture that'd make a horse laugh."

Laughing like a horse, or as a horse would laugh if a horse ever laughed, he rocked to and fro on his heels.

"Sh-sh; not so loud, please," importuned Mr. Leary, casting an uneasy glance toward the lighted windows above. "Somebody might hear you!"

"I hope somebody does hear me," gurgled the temperamental Mr. Cassidy, now once more thoroughly beset by his mirth. "I need somebody to help me laugh. By cripes, I need a whole crowd to help me; and I know a way to get them!"

He twisted his head round so his voice would ascend the hallway. "Hey, fellers and skoirts," he called; "you that's fixin' to leave! Hurry on down here quick and see Algy, the livin' peppermint lossenger, before he melts away with his own sweetness."

Obedying the summons with promptness a flight of the Lawrence P. McGillicuddy's, accompanied for the

most part by lady friends, cascaded down the stairs and erupted forth upon the sidewalk.

"Here y'are—right here!" clarioned Mr. Cassidy as the first skylarkish pair showed in the doorway. His manner was drolly that of a showman exhibiting a rare freak, newly captured. "Come a-runnin'!"

They came a-running and there were a dozen of them or possibly fifteen; blithesome spirits, all, and they fenced in the shrinking shape of Mr. Leary with a close and curious ring of themselves, and the combined volume of their glad, amazed outbursts might be heard for a distance of furlongs. On prankish impulse then they locked hands and with skipplings and prancings and impromptu jig steps they circled about him; and he, had he sought to speak, could not well have been heard; and, anyway, he was for the moment past speech, because of being entirely engaged in giving vent to one vehement sneeze after another. And next, above the chorus of joyous whooping might be heard individual comments, each shrieked out shrilly and each punctuated by a sneeze from Mr. Leary's convulsed frame; or lacking that by a simulated sneeze from one of the revellers—one with a fine humorous flare for mimicry. And these comments were, for example, such as:

"Git onto the socks!"

"Ker-chew!"

"And the slippers!"

"Ker-chew!"

"And them lovely pink garters!"

"Ker-chew!"

"Oh, you cutey! Oh, you cut-up!"

"Ker-chew!"

"Oh, you candy kid!"

"And say, git onto the cunnin' elbow sleeves our little playmate's sportin'."

"Yes, but goils, just pipe the poilies—ain't they the greatest ever?"

"They sure are. Say, kiddo, gimme one of 'em to remember you by, won't you? You'll never miss it—you got a-plenty more."

"Wot d'ye call wot he's got on 'um, anyway?" The speaker was a male, naturally.

"W'y, you big stoopid, can't you see he's wearin' rompers?" The answer came in a giggle, from a gay youthful creature of the opposite sex as she kicked out roguishly.

"Well, then be chee, w'y don't he romp a little?"

"Give 'um time, cancher? Don't you see he's blowin' out his flues? He's busy now. He'll romp in a minute."

"Sure he will! We'll romp with 'um."

A waggish young person in white beaded slippers and a green sport skirt broke free from the cavorting ring, and behind Mr. Leary's back the nimble fingers of the madcap tapped his spinal ornamentations as an instrumentalist taps the stops of an organ; and she chanted a familiar counting game of childhood:

"Rich man—poor man—beggar man—thief—doctor—loiryer——"

"Sure, he said he was a loiryer." It was Mr. Cassidy breaking in. "And he said his name was Algernon. Well, I believe the Algernon part—the big A. P. A."

"Oh, you Algy!"

"Algernon, does your mother know you're out?"

"T'ree cheers for Algy, the walkin' comic valentine!"

"Algy, Algy—Oh, you cutey Algy!" These jolly Greenwich Villagers were going to make a song of his name. They did make a song of it, and it was a frolicsome song and pitched to a rollicksome key. Congenial newcomers arrived, pelting down from upstairs whence they had been drawn by the happy rocketing clamour; and they caught spirit and step and tune with the rest and helped manfully to sing it. As one poet hath said, "And now reigned high carnival." And as another has so aptly phrased it, "There was sound of revelry by night." And, as the second poet once put it, or might have put it so if so be he didn't, "And all went merry as a marriage bell." But when we, adapting the line to our own descriptive usages, now say all went merry we should save out one exception—one whose form alternately was racked by hot flushes of a terrific self-consciousness and by humid gusts of an equally terrific sneezing fit.

VI

"HERE, here, here! Cut out the yellin'! D'you want the whole block up out of their beds?" The voice of the personified law, gruff and authoritative, broke in upon the clamour, and the majesty of the law, typified in bulk, with galoshes, ear muffs and woollen gloves on, not to mention the customary uniform of blue and brass, ploughed a path toward the centre of the group.

"'S all right, Switzer," gaily replied a hoydenish las-

sie; she, the same who had begged Mr. Leary for a sea-pearl souvenir. "But just see wot Morrie Cassidy went and found here on the street!"

Patrolman Switzer looked then where she pointed, and could scarce believe his eyes. In his case gleefulness took on a rumbling thunderous form, which shook his being as with an ague and made him to beat himself violently upon his ribs.

"D'ye blame us for carryin' on, Switzer, when we seen it ourselves?"

"I don't—and that's a fact," Switzer confessed between gurgles. "I wouldn't a blamed you much if you'd fell down and had a fit." And then he rocked on his heels, filled with joviality clear down to his rubber soles. Anon, though, he remembered the responsibilities of his position. "Still, at that, and even so," said he, sobering himself, "enough of a good thing's enough." He glared accusingly, yea, condemningly, at the unwitting cause of the quelled commotion.

"Say, what's the idea, you carousin' round Noo York City this hour of the night diked up like a Coney Island Maudie Graw? And what's the idea, you causin' a boisterous and disorderly crowd to collect? And what's the idea, you makin' a disturbance in a vicinity full of decent hard-workin' people that's tryin' to get a little rest? What's the general idea, anyhow?"

At this moment Mr. Leary having sneezed an uncountable number of times, regained the powers of coherent utterance.

"It is not my fault," he said. "I assure you of that,

officer. I am being misjudged; I am the victim of circumstances over which I have no control. You see, officer, I went last evening to a fancy-dress party and _____”

“Well, then, why didn’t you go on home afterwards and behave yourself?”

“I did—I started, in a taxicab. But the taxicab driver was drunk and he went to sleep on the way and the taxicab stopped and I got out of it and started to walk across town looking for another taxicab and _____”

“Started walkin’, dressed like that?”

“Certainly not. I had an overcoat on, of course. But a highwayman held me up at the point of a revolver, and he took my overcoat and what money I had and my card case and——”

“Where did all this here happen—this here alleged robbery?”

“Not two blocks away from here, right over in the next street to this one.”

“I don’t believe nothin’ of the kind!”

Patrolman Switzer spoke with enhanced severity; his professional honour had been touched in a delicate place. The bare suggestion that a footpad might dare operate in a district under his immediate personal supervision would have been to him deeply repugnant, and here was this weirdly attired wanderer making the charge direct.

“But, officer, I insist—I protest that——”

“Young feller, I think you’ve been drinkin’, that’s what I think about you. Your voice sounds to me like you’ve been drinkin’ about a gallon of mixed ale.

I think you dreamed all this here pipe about a robber and a pistol and an overcoat and a taxicab and all. Now you take a friendly tip from me and you run along home as fast as ever you can, and you get them delirious clothes off of you and then you get in bed and take a good night's sleep and you'll feel better. Because if you don't it's goin' to be necessary for me to run you in for a public nuisance. I ain't askin' you—I'm tellin' you, now. If you don't want to be locked up, start movin'—that's my last word to you."

The recent merry-makers, who had fallen silent the better to hear the dialogue, grouped themselves expectantly, hoping and waiting for a yet more exciting and humorous sequel to what had gone before—if such a miracle might be possible. Nor were they to be disappointed. The dénouement came quickly upon the heels of the admonition.

For into Mr. Leary's reeling and distracted mind the warning had sent a clarifying idea darting. Why hadn't he thought of a police station before now? Perforce the person in charge at any police station would be under requirement to shelter him. What even if he were locked up temporarily? In a cell he would be safe from the slings and arrows of outrageous ridicule; and surely among the functionaries in any station house would be one who would know a gentleman in distress, however startlingly the gentleman might be garbed. Surely, too, somebody—once that somebody's amazement had abated—would be willing to do some telephoning for him. Perhaps, even, a policeman off duty might be induced to take his word for it that he was what he really was, and not what he seemed to be, and loan him a change of clothing.

Hot upon the inspiration Mr. Leary decided on his course of action. He would get himself safely and expeditiously removed from the hateful company and the ribald comments of the Lawrence P. McGillicuddys and their friends. He would get himself locked up—that was it. He would now take the first steps in that direction.

“Are you goin’ to start on home purty soon like I’ve just been tellin’ you; or are you ain’t?” snapped Patrolman Switzer, who, it would appear, was by no means a patient person.

“I am not!” The crafty Mr. Leary put volumes of husky defiance into his answer. “I’m not going home—and you can’t make me go home, either.” He rejoiced inwardly to see how the portly shape of Switzer stiffened and swelled at the taunt. “I’m a citizen and I have a right to go where I please, dressed as I please, and you don’t dare to stop me. I defy you to arrest me!” Suddenly he put both his hands in Patrolman Switzer’s fleshy midriff and gave him a violent shove. An outraged grunt went up from Switzer, a delighted whoop from the audience. Swept off his balance by the prospect of fruition for his design the plotter had technically been guilty before witnesses of a violent assault upon the person of an officer in the sworn discharge of his duty.

He felt himself slung violently about. One mitted hand fixed itself in Mr. Leary’s collar yoke at the rear; the other closed upon a handful of slack material in the lower breadth of Mr. Leary’s principal habiliment just below where his buttons left off.

“So you won’t come, won’t you? Well, then, I’ll show you—you pink strawberry drop!”

Enraged at having been flaunted before a jeering audience the patrolman pushed his prisoner ten feet along the sidewalk, imparting to the offender's movements an involuntary gliding gait, with backward jerks between forward shoves; this method of propulsion being known in the vernacular of the force as "givin' a skate the bum's rush."

"Hey, Switzer, lend me your key and I'll ring for the wagon for you," volunteered Mr. Cassidy. His care-free companions, some of them, cheered the suggestion, seeing in it prospect of a prolonging of this delectable sport which providence without charge had so graciously deigned to provide.

"Never mind about the wagon. Us two'll walk, me and him," announced the patrolman. "'Taint so far where we're goin', and the walk'll do this fresh guy a little good—maybe'll sober him up. And never mind about any of the rest of you taggin' along behind us neither. This is a pinch—not a free street parade. Go on home now, the lot of youse, before you wake up the whole Lower West Side."

Loath to be cheated out of the last act of a comedy so unique and so rich the whimsical McGillicuddys and their chosen mates fell reluctantly away, with yells and gibes and quips and farewell bursts of laughter.

VII

CLOSELY hyphenated together the deep blue figure and the bright pink one rounded the corner and were alone. It was time to open the overtures which would establish Patrolman Switzer upon the basis of a better understanding of things. Mr. Leary, craning his neck

in order to look rearward into the face of his custodian, spoke in a key very different from the one he had last employed.

"I really didn't intend, you know, to resist you, officer. I had a private purpose in what I did. And you were quite within your rights. And I'm very grateful to you—really I am—for driving those people away."

"Is that so?" The inflection was grimly and heavily sarcastic.

"Yes. I am a lawyer by profession, and generally speaking I know what your duties are. I merely made a show—a pretence, as it were—of resisting you, in order to get away from that mob. It was—ahem—it was a device on my part—in short, a trick."

"Is that so? Fixin' to try to beg off now, huh? Well, nothin' doin'! Nothin' doin'! I don't know whether you're a fancy nut or a plain souse or what-all, but whatever you are you're under arrest and you're goin' with me."

"That's exactly what I desire to do," resumed the schemer. "I desire most earnestly to go with you."

"You're havin' your wish, ain't you? Well, then, the both of us should oughter be satisfied."

"I feel sure," continued the wheedling and designing Mr. Leary, "that as soon as we reach the station house I can make satisfactory atonement to you for my behaviour just now and can explain everything to your superiors in charge there, and then——"

"Station house!" snorted Patrolman Switzer. "Why, say, you ain't headin' for no station house. The crowd that's over there where you're headin' for should be grateful to me for bringin' you in. You'll be a treat

to them, and it's few enough pleasures some of them gets——”

A new, a horrid doubt assailed Mr. Leary's sorely taxed being. He began to have a dread premonition that all was not going well and his brain whirled anew.

“But I prefer to be taken to the station house,” he began.

“And who are you to be preferrin' anything at all?” countered Switzer. “I'll phone back to the station where I am and what I've done; though that part of it's no business of yours. I'll be doin' that after I've arraigned you over to Jefferson Market.”

“Jeff—Jefferson Market!”

“Sure, 'tis to Jefferson Market night court you're headin' this minute. Where else? They're settin' late over there to-night; the magistrate is expectin' some raids somewheres about daylight, I dope it. Anyhow, they're open yet; I know that. So it'll be me and you for Jefferson Market inside of five minutes; and I'm thinkin' you'll get quite a reception.”

Jefferson Market! Mr. Leary could picture the rows upon rows of gloating eyes. He heard the incredulous shout that would mark his entrance, the swell of unholy glee from the benches that would interrupt the proceedings. He saw stretched upon the front pages of the early editions of the afternoon yellows the glaring black-faced headlines:

WELL - KNOWN LAWYER
CLAD IN PINK ROMPERS
HALED TO NIGHT COURT

He saw—but Switzer's next remark sent a fresh shudder of apprehension through him, caught all again, as he was, in the coils of accursed circumstance.

"Magistrate Voris will be gettin' sleepy what with waitin' for them raids to be pulled off, and I make no doubt the sight of you will put him in a good humour."

And Magistrate Voris was his rival for the favours of Miss Milly Hollister! And Magistrate Voris was a person with a deformed sense of humour! And Magistrate Voris was sitting in judgment this moment at Jefferson Market night court. And now desperation, thrice compounded, rent the soul of the trapped victim of his own misaimed subterfuge.

"I won't be taken to any night court!" he shouted, wresting himself toward the edge of the sidewalk and dragging his companion along with him. "I won't go there! I demand to be taken to a station house. I'm a sick man and I require the services of a doctor."

"Startin' to be rough-house all over again, huh?" grunted Switzer vindictively. "Well, we'll see about that part of it, too—right now!"

Surrendering his lowermost clutch, the one in the silken seat of the suit of his writhing prisoner, he fumbled beneath the tails of his overcoat for the disciplinary nippers that were in his righthand rear trousers pocket.

With a convulsive twist of his body Mr. Leary jerked himself free of the mittened grip upon his neckband, and as, released, he gave a deerlike lunge forward for liberty he caromed against a burdened ash can upon the curbstone and sent it spinning backward; then recovering sprang onward and outward

across the gutter in flight. In the same instant he heard behind him a crash of metal and a solid thud, heard a sound as of a scrambling solid body cast abruptly prone, heard the name of Deity profaned, and divined without looking back that the ash can, conveniently rolling between the plump legs of the personified Arm of the Law, had been Officer Switzer's undoing, and might be his salvation.

VIII

WITH never a backward glance he ran on, not doubling as a hare before the beagle, but following a straight course, like unto a hunted roebuck. He did not know he could run so fast, and he could not have run so fast any other time than this. Beyond was a crossing. It was blind instinct that made him double round the turn. And it was instinct, quickened and guided by desperation, that made him dart like a rose-tinted flash up the steps to the stoop of an old-fashioned residence standing just beyond the corner, spring inside the storm doors, draw them to behind him, and crouch there, hidden, as pursuit went lumbering by.

Through a chink between the door halves he watched breathlessly while Switzer, who moved with a pronounced limp and rubbed his knees as he limped, hobbled halfway up the block, slowed down, halted, glared about him for sight or sign of the vanished fugitive, and then misled by a false trail departed, padding heavily with a galoshed tread, round the next turn.

With his body still drawn well back within the shadow line of the overhanging cornice Mr. Leary coyly protruded his head and took visual inventory

of the neighbourhood. So far as any plan whatsoever had formed in the mind of our diffident adventurer he meant to bide where he was for the moment. Here, where he had shelter of a sort, he would recapture his breath and reassemble his wits. Even so, the respite from those elements which Mr. Leary dreaded most of all—publicity, observation, cruel jibes, the harsh raucous laughter of the populace—could be at best but a woefully transient one. He was not resigned—by no means was he resigned—to his fate; but he was helpless. For what ailed him there was no conceivable remedy.

Anon jocund day would stand tiptoe on something or other; Greenwich Village would awaken and bestir itself. Discovery would come, and forth he would be drawn like a shy, unwilling periwinkle from its shell, once more to play his abased and bashful rôle of free entertainer to guffawing mixed audiences. For all others in the great city there were havens and homes. But for a poor, lorn, unguided vagrant, enmeshed in the burlesque garnitures of a three-year-old male child, what haven was there? By night the part had been hard enough—as the unresponsive heavens above might have testified. By the stark unmerciful sunlight; by the rude, revealing glow of the impending day how much more scandalous would it be!

His haggard gaze swept this way and that, seeking possible succour where reason told him there could be no succour; and then as his vision pieced together this outjutting architectural feature and that into a coherent picture of his immediate surroundings he knew where he was. The one bit of chancy luck in a sequence of direful catastrophes had brought him here

to this very spot. Why, this must be West Ninth Street; it had to be, it was—oh joy, it was! And Bob Slack, his partner, lived in this identical block on this same side of the street.

With his throat throbbing to the impulse of new-born hope he emerged completely from behind the refuge of the storm doors, backed himself out and down upon the top step, and by means of a dubious illumination percolating through the fanlight above the inner door he made out the figures upon the lintel. This was such and such a number; therefore Bob Slack's number must be the second number to the eastward, at the next door but one.

IX

FIVE seconds later a fleet apparition of a prevalent pinkish tone gave a ranging house cat the fright of its life as former darted past latter to vault nimbly up the stone steps of a certain weatherbeaten four-story-and-basement domicile. Set in the door jamb here was a vertical row of mail-slots, and likewise a vertical row of electric push buttons; these objects attesting to the fact that this house, once upon a time the home of a single family, had eventually undergone the transformation which in lower New York befalls so many of its kind, and had become a layer-like succession of light-housekeeping apartments, one apartment to a floor, and the caretaker in the basement.

Since Bob Slack's bachelor quarters were on the topmost floor Bob Slack's push button would be the next to the lowermost of the battery of buttons. A chilled tremulous finger found that particular button and pressed it long and hard, released it, pressed it

again and yet again. And in the interval following each period of pressing the finger's owner hearkened, all ears, for the answering click-click that would tell him the sleeper having been roused by the ringing had risen and pressed the master button that released the mechanism of the street door's lock.

But no welcome clicking rewarded the expectant ringer. Assuredly Bob Slack must be the soundest sleeper in the known world. He who waited rang and rang and rerang. There was no response.

Eventually conviction was forced upon Mr. Leary that he must awaken the caretaker—who, he seemed dimly to recall as a remembrance of past visits to Bob Slack, was a woman; and this done he must induce the caretaker to admit him to the inside of the house. Once within the building the refugee promised himself he would bring the slumberous Slack to consciousness if he had to beat down that individual's door doing it. He centred his attack upon the bottom push button of all. Directly, from almost beneath his feet, came the sound of an areaway window being unlatched, and a drowsy female somewhat crossly inquired to know who might be there and what might be wanted.

"It's a gentleman calling on Mr. Slack," wheezed Mr. Leary with his head over the balusters. He was getting so very, very hoarse. "I've been ringing his bell, but I can't seem to get any answer."

"A gentleman at this time o' night!" The tone was purely incredulous.

"Yes; a close friend of Mr. Slack's," assured Mr. Leary, striving to put stress of urgency into his accents, and only succeeding in imparting an added

hoarseness to his fast-failing vocal cords. "I'm his law partner, in fact. I must see him at once, please—it's very important, very pressing indeed."

"Well, you can't be seein' him."

"C-can't see him? What do you mean?"

"I mean he ain't here, that's what. He's out. He's went out for the night. He's gineraly always out on Friday nights—playin' cards at his club, I think. And sometimes he don't come in till it's near breakfast time. If you're a friend of his I sh'd think it'd be likely you'd know that same."

"Oh, I do—I do," assented Mr. Leary earnestly; "only I had forgotten it. I've had so many other things on my mind. But surely he'll be coming in quite soon now—it's pretty late, you know."

"Don't I know that for myself without bein' told?"

"Yes, quite so, of course; naturally so." Mr. Leary was growing more and more nervous, and more and more chilled, too. "But if you'll only be so very kind as to let me in I'll wait for him in his apartment."

"Let you in without seein' you or knowin' what your business is? I should guess not! Besides, you couldn't be gettin' inside his flat anyways. He's locked it, unless he's forgot to, which ain't likely, him bein' a careful man, and he must a-took the key with him. I know I ain't got it."

"But if you'll just let me inside the building that will be sufficient. I would much rather wait inside if only in the hall, than out here on the stoop in the cold."

"No doubt, no doubt you would all of that." The tone of the unseen female was drily suspicious. "But is it likely I'd be lettin' a stranger into the place, that

I never seen before, and ain't seen yet for that matter, just on the strength of his own word? And him comin' unbeknownst, at this hour of the mornin'? A fat chancet!"

"But surely, though, you must recall me—Mr. Leary, his partner. I've been here before. I've spoken to you."

"That voice don't sound to me like no voice I ever heard."

"I've taken cold—that's why it's altered."

"So? Then why don't you come down here where I can have a look at you and make sure?" inquired this careful chatelaine.

"I'm leaning with my head over the rail of the steps right above you," said Mr. Leary. "Can't you poke your head out and see my face? I'm quite sure you would recall me then."

"With this here iron gratin' acrost me window how could I poke me head out? Besides, it's dark. Say, mister, if you're on the level what's the matter with you comin' down here and not be standin' there palaverin' all the night?"

"I—I—well, you see, I'd rather not come for just a minute—until I've explained to you that—that my appearance may strike you as being a trifle unusual, in fact, I might say, queer," pleaded Mr. Leary, seeking by subtle methods of indirection to prepare her for what must surely follow.

"Never mind explainin'—gimme a look!" The suspicious tenseness in her voice increased. "I tell you this—ayther you come down here right this secont or I shut the window and you can be off or you can go to the divil or go anywheres you please for all

of me, because I'm an overworked woman and I need me rest and I've no more time to waste on you."

"Wait, please; I'm coming immediately," called out Mr. Leary.

He forced his legs to carry him down the steps and reluctantly, yet briskly, he propelled his pink-hued person toward the ray of light that streamed out through the grated window-opening and fell across the areaway.

"You mustn't judge by first appearances," he was explaining with a false and transparent attempt at matter-of-factness as he came into the zone of illumination. "I'm not what I seem, exactly. You see, I _____"

"Mushiful Evans!" The exclamation was half shrieked, half gasped out; and on the words the window was slammed to, the light within flipped out, and through the glass from within came a vehement warning.

"Get away, you—you lunatic! Get away from here now or I'll have the cops on you."

"But please, please listen," he entreated, with his face close against the bars. "I assure you, madam, that I can explain everything if you will only listen."

There was no mercy, no suggestion of relenting in the threatening message that came back to him.

"If you ain't gone from here in ten seconts I'll ring for the night watchman on the block, and I'll blow a whistle for the police. I've got me hand on the alarm hook right now. Will you go or will I rouse the whole block?"

"Pray be calm, madam, I'll go. In fact, I'm going now."

He fell back out of the areaway. Fresh uproar at this critical juncture would be doubly direful. It would almost certainly bring the vengeful Switzer, with his bruised shanks. It would inevitably bring some one.

X

MR. LEARY retreated to the sidewalk, figuratively casting from him the shards and potsherds of his re-awakened anticipations, now all so rudely shattered again. He was doomed. It would inevitably be his fate to cower in these cold and drafty purlieus until

No, it wouldn't either!

Like a golden rift in a sable sky a brand-new ray of cheer opened before him. Who were those married friends of Slack's, who lived on the third floor—friends with whom once upon a time he and Slack had shared a chafing-dish supper? What was the name? Brady? No, Braydon. That was it—Mr. and Mrs. Edward Braydon. He would slip back again, on noiseless feet, to the doorway where the bells were. He would bide there until the startled caretaker had gone back to her sleep, or at least to her bed. Then he would play a solo on the Braydons' bell until he roused them. They would let him in, and beyond the peradventure of a doubt, they would understand what seemed to be beyond the ken of flighty and excitable underlings. He would make them understand, once he was in and once the first shock of beholding him had abated within them. They were a kindly, hospitable couple, the Braydons were. They would be only too glad to give him shelter from the elements until Bob

Slack returned from his session at bridge. He was saved!

Within the coping of the stoop he crouched and waited—waited for five long palpitating minutes which seemed to him as hours. Then he applied an eager and quivering finger to the Braydons' button. Sweet boon of vouchsafed mercy! Almost instantly the latch clicked. And now in another instant Mr. Leary was within solid walls, with the world and the weather shut out behind him.

He stood a moment, palpitant with mute thanksgiving, in the hallway, which was made obscure rather than bright by a tiny pinprick of gaslight; and as thus he stood, fortifying himself with resolution for the embarrassing necessity of presenting himself, in all his show of quaint frivolity, before these comparative strangers, there came floating down the stair well to him in a sharp half-whisper a woman's voice.

"Is that you?" it asked.

"Yes," answered Mr. Leary, truthfully. It was indeed he, Algernon Leary, even though someone else seemingly was expected. But the explanation could wait until he was safely upstairs. Indeed, it must wait. Attempted at a distance it would take on rather a complicated aspect; besides, the caretaker just below might overhear, and by untoward interruptions complicate a position already sufficiently delicate and difficult.

Down from above came the response, "All right then. I've been worried, you were so late coming in, Edward. Please slip in quietly and take the front room. I'm going on back to bed."

"All right!" grunted Mr. Leary.

But already his plan had changed; the second speech down the stair well had caused him to change it. Safety first would be his motto from now on. Seeing that Mr. Edward Braydon apparently was likewise out late it would be wiser and infinitely more discreet on his part did he avoid further disturbing Mrs. Braydon, who presumably was alone and who might be easily frightened. So he would just slip on past the Braydon apartment, and in the hallway on the fourth floor he would cannily bide, awaiting the truant Slack's arrival.

On tiptoe then, flight by flight, he ascended toward the top of the house. He was noiselessly progressing along the hallway of the third floor; he was about midway of it when under his tread a loose plank gave off an agonized squeak, and, as involuntarily he crouched, right at his side a door was flung open.

What the discomfited refugee saw, at a distance from him to be measured by inches rather than by feet, was the face of a woman; and not the face of young Mrs. Edward Braydon, either, but the face of a middle-aged lady with startled eyes widely staring, with a mouth just dropping ajar as sudden horror relaxed her jaw muscles, and with a head of grey hair haloed about by a sort of nimbus effect of curl papers. What the strange lady saw—well, what the strange lady saw may best perhaps be gauged by what she did, and that was instantly to slam and bolt the door and then to utter a succession of calliopelike shrieks, which echoed through the house and which immediately were answered back by a somewhat similar series of outcries from the direction of the basement.

XI

UP the one remaining flight of stairs darted the intruder. He flung himself with all his weight and all his force against Bob Slack's door. It wheezed from the impact, but its stout oaken panels held fast. Who says the impossible is really impossible? The accumulated testimony of the ages shows that given the emergency a man can do anything he just naturally has to do. Neither by training nor by habit of life nor yet by figure was Mr. Leary athletically inclined, but a trained gymnast might well have envied the magnificent agility with which he put a foot upon the door-knob and sprang upward, poising himself there upon a slippered toe, with one set of fingers clutching fast to the minute projections of the door frame while with his free hand he thrust recklessly against the transom.

The transom gave under the strain, moving upward and inward upon its hinges, disclosing an oblong gap above the jamb. With a splendid wriggle the fugitive vaulted up, thrusting his person into the clear space thus provided. Balanced across the opening upon his stomach, half in and half out, for one moment he remained there, his legs kicking wildly as though for a purchase against something more solid than air. Then convulsive desperation triumphed over physical limitations. There was a rending, tearing sound as of some silken fabric being parted biaswise of its fibres, and Mr. Leary's droll after sections vanished inside; and practically coincidentally therewith, Mr. Leary descended upon the rugged floor with a thump which any other time would have stunned him into tempo-

rary helplessness, but which now had the effect merely of stimulating him onward to fresh exertion.

In a fever of activity he sprang up. Pawing a path through the encompassing darkness, stumbling into and over various sharp-cornered objects, barking his limbs with contusions and knowing it not, he found the door of the inner room—Bob Slack's bedroom—and once within that sanctuary he, feeling along the walls, discovered a push bulb and switched on the electric lights.

What matter though the whole house grew clamorous now with a mounting and increasing tumult? What mattered it though he could hear more and more startled voices commingled with the shattering shrieks emanating from the Braydon apartment beneath his feet? He, the hard-pressed and sore-beset and the long-suffering, was at last beyond the sight of mortal eyes. He was locked in, with two rooms and a bath to himself, and he meant to maintain his present refuge, meant to hold this fort against all comers, until Bob Slack came home. He would barricade himself in if need be. He would pile furniture against the doors. If they took him at all it would be by direct assault and overpowering numbers.

And while he withstood siege and awaited attack he would rid himself of these unlucky caparisons that had been his mortification and his undoing. When they broke in on him—if they did break in on him—he would be found wearing some of Bob Slack's clothes. Better far to be mistaken for a burglar than to be dragged forth lamentably yet fancifully attired as Himself at the Age of Three. The one thing might be explained—and in time would be; but the other?

He felt that he was near the breaking point; that he could no more endure.

XII

HE stopped where he was, in the middle of the room, with his eyes and his hands seeking for the seams of the closing of his main garment. Then he remembered what in his stress he had forgotten—the opening or perhaps one should say the closing was at the back. He twisted his arms rearward, his fingers groping along his spine.

Now any normal woman has the abnormal ability to do and then to undo a garment hitching behind. Nature, which so fashioned her elbows that she cannot throw a stone at a hen in the way in which a stone properly should be thrown at a hen, made suitable atonement for this articular oversight by endowing her joints with the facile knack of turning on exactly the right angle, with never danger of sprain or dislocation, for the subjugation of a back-latching frock. Moreover, years of practice have given her adeptness in accomplishing this achievement, so that to her it has become an everyday feat. But man has neither the experience to qualify him nor yet the bodily adaptability.

By reaching awkwardly up and over his shoulder Mr. Leary managed to tug the topmost button of his array of buttons out of its attendant buttonholes, but below and beyond that point he could not progress. He twisted and contorted his body; he stretched his arms in their sockets until twin pangs of agony met and crossed between his shoulder blades, and with his two exploring hands he pulled and fumbled and pawed

and wrenched and wrested, to make further headway at his task. But the sewing-on had been done with stout thread; the buttonholes were taut and snug and well made. Those slippery flat surfaces amply resisted him. They eluded him; defied him; outmastered him. Thanks be to, or curses be upon, the passionate zeal of Miss Rowena Skiff for exactitudes, he, lacking the offices of an assistant undresser, was now as definitely and finally inclosed in this distressful pink garment as though it had been his own skin. Speedily he recognised this fact in all its bitter and abominable truth, but mechanically, he continued to wrestle with the obdurate fastenings.

While he thus vainly contended, events in which he directly was concerned were occurring beneath that roof. From within his refuge he heard the sounds of slamming doors, of hurrying footsteps, of excited voices merging into a distracted chorus; but above all else, and from the rest, two of these voices stood out by reason of their augmented shrillness, and Mr. Leary marked them both, for since he had just heard them he therefore might identify their respective unseen owners.

"There's something—there's somebody in the house!" At the top of its register one voice was repeating the warning over and over again, and judging by direction this alarmist was shrieking her words through a keyhole on the floor below him. "I saw it—him—whatever it was. I opened my door to look out in the hall and it—he—was right there. Oh, I could have touched him! And then it ran and I didn't see him any more and I slammed the door and began screaming."

"You seen what?"

The strident question seemed to come from far below, down in the depths of the house, where the caretaker abided.

"Whatever it was. I opened the door and he was right in the hall there glaring at me. I could have touched it. And then he ran and I——"

"What was he like? I ast what was he like—it's that I'm astin' you!" The janitress was the one who pressed for an answer.

For the moment the question, pointed though it was, went unanswered. The main speaker—shrieker, rather—was plainly a person with a mania for details, and even in this emergency she intended, as now developed, to present all the principal facts in the case, and likewise all the incidental facts so far as these fell within her scope of knowledge.

"I was awake," she clarioned through the keyhole, speaking much faster than any one following this narrative can possibly hope to read the words. "I couldn't sleep. I never do sleep well when I'm in a strange house. And anyhow, I was all alone. My nephew by marriage—Mr. Edward Braydon, you know—had gone out with the gentleman who lives on the floor above to play cards, and he said he was going to be gone nearly all night, and my niece—I'm Mrs. Braydon's unmarried aunt from Poughkeepsie and I'm down here visiting them—my niece was called to Long Island yesterday by illness—it's her sister who's ill with something like the bronchitis. And he was gone and so she was gone, and so here I was all alone and he told me not to stay up for him, but I couldn't sleep well—I never can sleep in a strange house—and just a few

minutes ago I heard the bell ring and I supposed he had forgotten to take his latchkey with him, and so I got up to let him in. And I called down the stairs and asked him if it was him and he answered back. But it didn't sound like his voice. But I didn't think anything of that. But, of course, it was out of the ordinary for him to have a voice like that. But all the same I went back to bed. But he didn't come in and I was just getting up again to see what detained him—his voice really sounded so strange I thought then he might have been taken sick or something. But just as I got to the door a plank creaked and I opened the door and there it was right where I could have touched him. And then it ran—and oh, what if——”

“I'm astin' you once more what it was like?”

“How should I know except that——”

“Was it a big, fat, wild, bare-headed, scary, awful-lookin' scoundrel dressed in some kind of funny pink clothes?”

“Yes, that's it! That's him—he was all sort of pink. Oh, did you see him too? Oh, is it a burglar?”

“Burglar nothin'! It's a ravin', rampagin' lunatic—that's what it is!”

“Oh, my heavens, a lunatic!”

“Sure it is. He tried to git me to let him in and——”

“Oh, whatever shall we do!”

XIII

“HEY, what's all the excitement about?”

A new and deeper voice here broke into the babel, and Mr. Leary recognising it at a distance, where he stood listening—but not failing, even while he listened,

to strive unavailingly with his problem of buttons—knew he was saved. Knowing this he nevertheless retreated still deeper into the inner room. The thought of spectators in numbers remained very abhorrent to him. So he did not hear all that happened next, except in broken snatches.

He gathered though, from what he did hear, that Bob Slack and Mr. Edward Braydon were coming up the stairs, and that a third male whom they called Officer was coming with them, and that the janitress was coming likewise, and that divers lower-floor tenants were joining in the march, and that as they came the janitress was explaining to all and sundry how the weird miscreant had sought to inveigle her into admitting him to Mr. Slack's rooms, and how she had refused, and how with maniacal craft—or words to that effect—he had, nevertheless, managed to secure admittance to the house, and how he must still be in the house. And through all her discourse there were questions from this one or that, crossing its flow but in no wise interrupting it; and through it all percolated hootingly the terrorised outcries of Mr. Braydon's maiden aunt-in-law, issuing through the keyhole of the door behind which she cowered. Only now she was interjecting a new harassment into the already complicated mystery by pleading that someone repair straightway to her and render assistance, as she felt herself to be on the verge of fainting dead away.

With searches into closets and close scrutiny of all dark corners passed en route, the procession advanced to the top floor, mainly guided in its oncoming by the clew deduced from the circumstances of the mad intruder having betrayed a desire to secure access to Mr.

Slack's apartment, with the intention, as the caretaker more than once suggested on her way up, of murdering Mr. Slack in his bed. Before the ascent had been completed she was quite certain this was the correct deduction, and so continued to state with all the emphasis of which she was capable.

"He couldn't possibly have got downstairs again," somebody hazarded; "so he must be upstairs here still—must be right round here somewhere."

"Didn't I tell you he was lookin' for Mr. Slack to lay in wait for him and destroy the poor man in his bed?" shrilled the caretaker.

"Watch carefully now, everybody. He might rush out of some corner at us."

"Say, my transom's halfway open!" Mr. Bob Slack exclaimed. "And, by Jove, there's a light shining through it yonder from the bedroom. He's inside—we've got him cornered, whoever he is."

Boldly Mr. Slack stepped forward and rapped hard on the door.

"Better step on out peaceably," he called, "because there's an officer here with us and we've got you trapped."

"It's me, Bob, it's me," came in a wheezy, plaintive wail from somewhere well back in the apartment.

"Who's me?" demanded Mr. Slack, likewise forgetting his grammar in the thrill of this culminating moment.

"Algy—Algernon Leary."

"Not with that voice, it isn't. But I'll know in a minute who it is!" Mr. Slack reached pocketward for his keys.

"Better be careful. He might have a gun or something on him."

"Nonsense!" retorted Mr. Slack, feeling very valiant. "I'm not afraid of any gun. But you ladies might stand aside if you're frightened. All ready, officer? Now then!"

"Please come in by yourself, Bob. Don't—don't let anybody else come with you!"

XIV

IF he heard the faint and agonised appeal from within Mr. Slack chose not to heed it. He found the right key on his key ring, applied it to the lock, turned the bolt and shoved the door wide open, giving back then in case of an attack. The front room was empty. Mr. Slack crossed cautiously to the inner room and peered across the threshold into it, Mr. Braydon and a grey-coated private watchman and a procession of half-clad figures following along after him.

Where was the mysterious intruder? Ah, there he was, huddled up in a far corner alongside the bed as though he sought to hide himself away from their glaring eyes. And at the sight of what he beheld Mr. Bob Slack gave one great shocked snort of surprise, and then one of recognition.

For all that the cowering wretch wore a quaint garment of a bright and watermelonish hue, except where it was streaked with transom dust and marked with ash-can grit; for all that his head was bare, and his knees, and a considerable section of his legs as well; for all that he had white socks and low slippers, now soaking wet, upon his feet; for all his elbow sleeves and his pink garters and his low neck; and finally for all

that his face was now beginning, as they stared upon it, to wear the blank wan look of one who is about to succumb to a swoon of exhaustion induced by intense physical exertion or by acutely prolonged mental strain or by both together—Mr. Bob Slack detected in this fabulous oddity a resemblance to his associate in the practice of law at Number Thirty-two Broad Street.

"In the name of heaven, Leary——" he began.

But a human being can stand just so many shocks in a given number of minutes—just so many and no more. Gently, slowly, the gartered legs gave way, bending outward, and as their owner collapsed down upon his side with the light of consciousness flickering in his eyes, his figure was half-turned to them, and they saw how that he was ornamentally but securely buttoned down the back with many large buttons and how that with a last futile fluttering effort of his relaxing hands he fumbled first at one and then at another of these buttons.

"Leary, what in thunder have you been doing? And where on earth have you been?" Mr. Slack shot the questions forth as he sprang to his partner's side and knelt alongside the slumped pink shape.

Languidly Mr. Leary opened one comatose eye. Then he closed it again and the wraith of a smile formed about his lips, and just as he went sound asleep upon the floor Mr. Slack caught from Mr. Leary the softly whispered words, "I've been the life of the party!"

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